

Advocacy Through Social Media: Exploring Student Engagement in Addressing Social Issues

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Abstract

Social media have become ubiquitous and are seen as beneficial to society. Although the use of social media for educational purposes has been the subject of recent research, not much is known about their role in higher education civic engagement. Employing critical discourse analysis, this study explored the function of social media as a tool to promote the civic engagement of students through advocacy focused on identified social issues. Findings of this qualitative research are discussed as themes pertaining to the challenges of advocacy, the relative importance of advocacy processes, and the function of social media infrastructure. The authors also discuss the implications for pedagogy and for research in the area of technology-mediated, issue-focused advocacy by university students.

Keywords: advocacy, social media, civic engagement, Facebook, Twitter

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed phenomenal advances in Internet-based technologies and their widespread use in all sectors of society. Increasingly, technology usage has become standard practice in people's daily lives. There is also concomitant interest in applying these information and communication technologies to teaching and learning in higher education. In this regard, university professors have been turning to social media as communication avenues for active learning, or the immediate application of knowledge through engagement (Kassens-Noor, 2012; Prescott, 2014).

In an era when Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have a pervasive presence, it is not surprising that university faculty regard social media as a potentially powerful pedagogical tool. Twitter, for example, has been singled out for holding "potential as a powerful learning tool that can readily transmit knowledge, inform learners, and extend beyond individuals to their social networks" (Kassens-Noor, 2012, p. 12).

Whereas previous studies have focused on the promise that social media hold as a pedagogical tool (e.g., Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Prescott, 2014), to date there has not been any published study of the use of social media in higher education to foster student engagement relative to social issues. This study therefore addressed the question of student engagement with social issues through social media. In particular, the study explored the function of social media as a means of social-issue advocacy in the context of a university course.

Social Media and Their Use

Social media consist of websites and applications that enable users to create and share content and to participate in social networking. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, popular social media sites include Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn, and Myspace. Facebook is the largest online social network, with the number of daily active users reaching 1.28 billion in the first quarter of 2017 (*Facebook, 2017, Stats section*). Posts on Facebook can be very long (up to about 63,000 characters). Facebook users can post messages, photos, and videos; add hyperlinks (highlighting words connected to other sites or to additional, accessible information); reply to posts; and “like” content. The “Like” button functions as a way to “[g]ive feedback and connect with things you care about” (*Facebook Help Center, n.d.*).

With regard to Twitter, a standard message, or tweet, is extremely short; it is limited to 140 characters. Twitter users can retweet or reply to direct messages, and they can follow and be followed by other users. To offset the established 140-character limit, Twitter users may add links within tweets, which provide quick access to further information. They may also use hashtags to add context and metadata to tweets. According to Guo and Saxton (2014), hashtags are particularly important to advocacy groups for aggregating knowledge, rapidly disseminating information, and mobilizing people during advocacy campaigns. Additionally, Gordon (2014) has noted that such technological features heighten social media’s potential to facilitate dialogue and create communities online.

Social media offer considerable benefits to individuals, groups, and organizations. An obvious benefit is social media’s instrumentality in connecting diverse individuals and groups, even in far-flung regions, and making them feel connected to a common experience. Social media have been credited with spurring the Arab Spring revolution in the Middle East and Northern Africa (Harlow

& Guo, 2014; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012) as well as the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City (Penney & Dadas, 2014; Sorkin, 2012). More recently, a social media “resistance” movement against the new Trump administration in Washington has taken shape (Lever, 2017).

Social Media’s Relationship to Engagement

Today’s college students are among “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1) who have always known and been immersed in technology. Recent research has indicated a generally positive impact of students’ use of social media for educational purposes (e.g., Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Junco et al., 2011; Nelson Laird & Kuh, 2005). Junco et al. (2011), for instance, found that college students used Twitter in educationally relevant and productive ways, demonstrating a positive relationship between utilization of that platform and student engagement. Nelson Laird and Kuh’s (2005) study drew on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement to investigate the relationship between student uses of information technology and other forms of student engagement. The results of that study indicated a strong, positive relationship between the use of information technology for educational purposes and other effective educational practices such as active and collaborative learning.

However, we are mindful that social media can foster superficiality as users engage in multitasking and consequently do not pay sufficient attention to the thoroughness or completeness of specific tasks. Indeed, constant connection to digital devices “promotes digital distraction not just at the expense of self-reflection, but also to the detriment of engagement beyond the self” (Kelly, 2015, p. 114). Ironically, the increase in digital connectivity can also cause isolation because personal interactions and relationships are often sacrificed for individualism. On the positive side, “networked individualism,” as Rainie and Wellman (2012) call it, does allow people to connect, communicate, and exchange information efficiently with numerous, diverse others.

A well-known concern among university faculty members is the academic engagement of students. Course instructors are fundamentally concerned about student engagement in relation to the subject matter and participation in class. Many adopt “time-on-task” as a proxy measure for student engagement. *Time-on-task* refers to the amount of time students spend on academic tasks (Prater, 1992). As Axelson and Flick (2010) have explained, student engagement has come to mean “how involved or interested students

appear to be in their learning and how *connected* they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (*p. 38, emphasis in original*).

In addition to academic engagement as explained above, the civic engagement of students is a priority in American higher education. Civic engagement generally involves the movement of individuals and organizations “away from disinterest, distraction, ignorance, and apathy and towards education, understanding, motivation, and action” (*Obar et al., 2012, p. 2*). Civic engagement as an institutional priority is evidenced by the participation of more than 1,100 colleges and universities in Campus Compact, the national organization dedicated to civic engagement in higher education (*Campus Compact, 2017*). As direct participants in civic engagement, students (and also faculty and staff) bring their knowledge, skills, and resources to bear on issues affecting the community.

A number of researchers have suggested that social media can be leveraged to foster civic engagement and meet social change goals (*Aaker & Smith, 2010; LaRiviere, Snider, Stromberg, & O’Meara, 2012; Obar et al., 2012*). The benefits of social media for civic engagement include the ability of individuals to interact and collaborate in real time (*Guo & Saxton, 2014*) and to build a necessary sense of community that can facilitate collective action.

Some scholars have questioned whether online interactions can be as effective as face-to-face relationships in civic engagement, especially in building the levels of trust necessary for sustained collective action (*Harlow & Guo, 2014; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010*). For instance, Shulman (2009) has long raised doubts about the efficaciousness of public participation through online means. In the same vein, Soon and Kluver (2014) mentioned “doubts pertaining to the relationship between communication on the web and its outcome in terms of engendering participation in collective campaigns” (*p. 502*).

Advocacy as a Form of Engagement

Advocacy is a distinct form of civic engagement and is often seen as a precursor or complement to direct action or civic activism. Groups and organizations use advocacy to address such issues as civil rights, education, health care, the environment, and the criminal justice system. They champion causes and seek to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems. Advocacy groups usually raise concerns about policies and practices that they consider unjust or about institutions that are unresponsive to people’s needs (*Berke, Boyd-Soisson, Voorhees, & Reininga, 2010*).

According to Bowen (2014), “Effective advocacy increases the power of people to make institutions more responsive to human needs, and it influences public policy and decisions regarding the allocation of resources” (p. 53).

Guo and Saxton (2014) have identified media advocacy as a specific tactic whose ultimate goal is to mobilize supporters. Among social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter seem well suited to advocacy because of their decentralized structure and interactivity. Because it encourages brevity, Twitter is considered most amenable to ongoing, public dialogue (Junco *et al.*, 2011).

Obar *et al.* (2012) reported that U.S. advocacy groups believed that social media could facilitate civic engagement and collective action by strengthening outreach efforts, enabling “engaging feedback loops” (p. 15), increasing speed of communication, and being cost-effective. In their study of social media use in the nonprofit sector, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012, p. 342) identified “action,” encompassing participation in advocacy campaigns, as a communicative function of social media. Generally, the Internet has made it much easier to conduct advocacy—to arrange campaigns, spread the word, and get signatures on petitions (Christensen, 2011)—even if, as Twenge (2013) found, it does not necessarily lead to other forms of civic engagement such as writing to public officials.

Nevertheless, proponents of social media as a tool for advocacy or social action should be cognizant of the usually tenuous existence of online movements. For example, although the open-door nature and horizontal governance of online movements may make joining simple, it also allows joiners to leave within mere seconds. As LaRiviere *et al.* (2012) have noted, students may join online simply to say they are part of a movement when they really are not involved in it at all. Lack of genuine involvement would perhaps give credence to the old claim that social media have encouraged “slacktivism,” or “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Morozov, 2009, *para.* 1).

The purpose of this article is to report our research on students’ use of social media for advocacy as part of a university course. Our research question was straightforward: Does students’ use of social media for advocacy facilitate engagement with a social issue?

Methods

The study reported herein was a qualitative inquiry into the use of social media for advocacy as part of a university undergraduate course. We reasoned that a qualitative approach would allow us

to gain insights into our students' interactions with other users of Web 2.0 technologies. Although we would record quantitative data, such as the number of messages posted on social media, we were more interested in textual data (actual posts and tweets) that would provide evidence of meaningful engagement.

We defined engagement as students' purposeful and sustained use of social media as an instrument for advocacy pertaining to an identified social issue (i.e., a problem or conflict that concerns a considerable number of people in the society). Engagement, then, would reflect students' time and effort invested in relevant communication or interactions with other social media users regarding a specific social issue. We would expect students to sustain the communication or interactions over the course of a semester, or approximately 15 weeks.

The number of original and follow-up messages (posts, tweets, etc.) would be taken into consideration, as would the number of likes on Facebook and followers on Twitter. However, those numbers would not be the determinant of engagement. A relatively large number of likes, for example, would indicate that many potential supporters of the advocacy effort had received a pertinent message from the student as an advocate.

Research Context and Participants

We conducted our study at a private university in the southeastern United States, where active learning pedagogies are emphasized. An assigned advocacy project was a component of two sections of Introduction to Communication, a required course for communication majors. The authors of the course textbook refer to "public advocacy" and explain, "Through public advocacy, we collaborate with others in an open conversation wherein we reflect on our relationships with one another and work toward a common good" (*Warren & Fassett, 2015*, p. 9).

A major requirement of the course was students' use of social media for advocacy-related communication in response to current social issues. As part of the semester-long project, students were instructed specifically to (1) submit an advocacy project proposal; (2) create, promote, and maintain a social media/networking site aimed at generating substantive content; and (3) write a paper reflecting on their experience in terms of both process and product. The students had a choice of social issues to address and social media technology to employ. Giving them those choices, we hoped,

would give them a sense of ownership of the advocacy project and impetus for real engagement.

All students enrolled in both sections of Introduction to Communication were invited to take part as respondents in the research, which was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Before data collection began, each student willing to participate provided informed consent as part of an administrative process that excluded the course instructors. The coordinator of the administrative process informed students that their participation in the research was not a requirement of the course. They could decline to participate at any time, and this would not affect their course grades in any way. A total of 20 students eventually became respondents in the study.

Data Collection

We collected two sets of data. The first was data extracted from content that students created on social media pages—that is, the messages posted on social media and the responses received. After noting the types of social media platforms utilized, we examined the actual use of those platforms as reflected in the content created or generated by our students. Further, as part of the data-collection process, we copied Twitter feeds and Facebook posts in full and within a trail of discourse to maintain context.

The second set of data was derived from students' reflection papers. As explained below, we reviewed the reflection papers to extract pertinent data.

Our study employed methodological triangulation, defined as "the comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest" (*Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240*). Content of social media pages and reflective comments were the two forms of evidence sought in our study.

Data Analysis

We began data analysis after all students had completed the course and had received their final grades. Therefore, the analysis was unobtrusive and was not affected by the potential bias of the student–instructor power relationship.

The principles and procedure of critical discourse analysis (*Gee, 2014*) informed our approach to analyzing data from social media sites. Taking a "critical" approach indicates our interest in examining the social issues raised as part of the discourse. The units of analysis were the content of the social media pages—the text and

related images. We used a copy-and-paste process to produce a “broad” transcript of the messages (Gee, 2014, p. 136) and also saved screen shots in a folder for analysis. We labeled segments of text and connected similarly labeled segments based on their situated meanings—“the highly specific meanings that words and phrases take on in actual contexts of use” (Gee, 2014, p. 81). The structures within the discourse (e.g., grammar) were excluded from the analysis because they would not serve the purposes of our study.

To prepare for the analysis of data derived from reflection papers, we organized and reduced the data through the coding process. Two of us read the reflection papers several times and independently coded them. First, we performed open coding, examining and categorizing the qualitative data. We included some “*in vivo*” codes (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 69) by labeling chunks of data with highly descriptive words extracted from students’ papers. Next, again independently, we did axial coding, making connections among the initial codes and relating them to broader categories of concepts. We then subsumed several concepts under five core concepts to produce themes grounded in the textual data. The third researcher reviewed the coding scheme and the categorization, checking interpretations against the raw data. After discussing discrepancies and resolving minor disagreements concerning the categorization and the themes, we finalized the analysis and the findings.

The findings are presented below as themes, with each theme supported by low-inference descriptors. As Seale (1999) has explained, low-inference descriptors include “verbatim accounts of what people say, for example, rather than researchers’ reconstructions of the general sense of what a person said, which would allow researchers’ personal perspectives to influence the reporting” (p. 148).

Coupled with triangulation, the use of *in vivo* codes and low-inference descriptors supported our efforts to establish the trustworthiness of the research findings. To enhance trustworthiness, we created an audit trail (Bowen, 2009) consisting of the principal elements of the research process.

Findings

The findings of this research are based on the two sets of data produced by students—data from the social media sites ($n = 19$) and from students’ reflection papers ($n = 20$). We present each set of findings in turn.

Social Media Use

The 20 students who participated in the study used four social media platforms to create and disseminate messages. One student used two platforms; most students (16, or 80%) used Facebook (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' Use of Social Media for Advocacy

Social Media Platform	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Facebook < https://www.facebook.com >	16	80
Twitter < https://twitter.com >	4	20
Tumblr < https://tumblr.com >	1	5
Blogger < www.blogspot.com >	1	5

Regarding the use of Facebook, students created pages calling attention to such social issues as domestic violence, human trafficking, child labor in sweatshops, obesity, and HIV/AIDS (Table 2). As many as six students (working in three teams) created Facebook pages to address the issue of domestic violence. The students sought to create awareness of the magnitude of the issue; they also emphasized that victims should not blame themselves and should seek help. On one of the Facebook pages, a picture illustrating the effects of domestic violence got 293 views, a relatively high number.

The Facebook page advocating an end to human trafficking had links to two YouTube videos featuring celebrities involved in the cause. That page had 95 likes. The Facebook page addressing HIV/AIDS included a link to the "HIV Testing" page at a charitable organization's website. At the same time, two students used that social media platform to advocate positive youth development, including activities to build life skills and raise self-esteem.

Table 2. Examples of Students' Use of Facebook for Advocacy

Facebook Pages (with Topics Addressed)	Posts	Video Units	Text Units	Picture- Only Units	Links to Other Sites/ Content	Likes	Comments
Hope Faith Cure: HIV and AIDS (HIV/AIDS)	45	3	42	0	11	27	0
Be the Change (Youth Development)	100	5	95	0	5	27	4
Support Against DV (Domestic Violence)	4	0	3	1	0	16	0
PeaceLoveUnity (Domestic Violence)	6	1	4	1	0	32	2
STDs: Protect Yourself, Get Tested (Sexually Transmitted Diseases)	29	8	21	0	9	34	0
The Naked Truth: Stay Classy, Not Trashy (Body Image/Self Esteem)	24	2	14	8	0	58	17
Lupus Advocacy Project (Lupus, the Autoimmune Disease)	31	1	10	20	6	49	1
Choose Your Life (Depression)	21	3	11	7	0	25	3
The Fight Against Childhood Obesity (Obesity)	43	11	20	17	0	24	3

The creators of a Twitter page titled “Be the Change” provided this purpose statement: “We give young people the tools to identify, learn about, and take action on the things that affect their lives as well as the lives of their peers.” The “Be the Change” team followed 133 other Twitter users and had 64 followers (Table 3).

Table 3. Examples of Students' Use of Twitter for Advocacy

Twitter Pages (with Topics Addressed)	Tweets	Retweets*	Tweets with Hashtags**	Tweets with Hyperlinks**	Following	Followers
Hope Faith Cure: HIV and AIDS (HIV/ AIDS)	80	61	44	91	28	16
Be the Change (Youth Development)	161	88	49	54	133	64

*A retweet is a tweet that has been shared further with all followers of the Twitter user. These retweets were made by the creators of the page—not by those following the page.

**Tweets with hashtags (using the # symbol to mark keywords or topics in a tweet to make it easily identifiable for search purposes) and hyperlinks (references to data that the reader may follow directly by clicking, tapping, or hovering) are not mutually exclusive.

A student team whose Twitter page was designed to raise awareness about the causes and consequences of HIV/AIDS, and to urge preventive measures, hashtagged relevant web pages, testing sites, and care services. Also included in that team's tweets were links to a 10-minute excerpt from the 25-minute film titled "Hope in the Time of AIDS"; YouTube interviews; and a Huffington Post blog post, "Prevention and Protection: The True Value of Condoms." The students advocated HIV/AIDS prevention through the donation of condoms (see message in Table 4).

Table 4. Examples of Posts and Tweets

Social Media Site	Topic	Message
Facebook	Domestic Violence	<p>"Domestic violence causes far more pain than the visible marks of bruises and scars. It is devastating to be abused by someone that you love and think loves you in return. It is estimated that approximately 3 million incidents of domestic violence are reported each year in the United States."—[U.S. Senator] Dianne Feinstein</p> <p>Help End Domestic Abuse</p> <p>(Below a picture of an obviously bruised and battered woman) Abust Hurts. Recognize, Respond, Refer</p>
	HIV/AIDS	<p>Taking an HIV test is the only way to find out if you have HIV. You should always take a test if you have put yourself at risk. Early HIV diagnosis is important so that treatment is effective, you stay well and you avoid passing HIV on to others.</p>

Table 4. Examples of Posts and Tweets

Social Media Site	Topic	Message
Twitter	HIV/AIDS	<p>7000 people per day are infected with HIV. Join Durex in working towards an HIV-free generation. Share to donate a condom <u>#IshareIcondom</u></p> <p>Visit http://www.aids.gov for information on the spread of HIV/AIDS, how to get tested, and various federal programs and treatment options.</p> <p>You can be tested by 3 quick and easy ways: mouth swab, urine sample or blood sample <u>#GetTested</u></p>
Youth Development		<p>(Accompanied by an illustration of youth activism) Encouraging a new generation of change</p> <p>Tweeting about issues is a way to start a movement towards a change.</p> <p>(Retweet from In South Florida: Digital Marketing Services) You need to be aware of what others are doing, applaud their efforts, acknowledge their successes, and encourage them in their pursuits.</p>
Blogger	Obesity	A lot of people today suffer from obesity and they're ... bullied and pushed down because of it. I've gone through something similar. In my case, I have confidence in myself and have been able to not let people's words or actions really change the way I view myself: beautiful and independent, despite my overweight. Because I have a confident voice, and I have a confident mind and the ability to say what I think ... I believe that I can make a difference and change some people's lives. Obesity isn't just about looking good, it's also about one's health and wellbeing.

The student who used Tumblr posted multimedia content to a short-form blog and sought followers. Her stated goal was to “shed light on black market cosmetic surgery” and to promote healthy lifestyles among her followers (totaling 52 on the advocacy project’s due date).

The student who used Blogger (blogspot.com) explained her motivation and intent (see message in Table 4). Several of her blog posts contained tips for people struggling with obesity; some were announcements of community events.

In terms of their “situated meanings” (Gee, 2014, p. 81), segments of text from Twitter feeds on domestic violence and obesity

emphasized hurt, pain, and suffering. Facebook posts touched on the causes and consequences of HIV/AIDS, depression, and other identified issues.

Reflection Papers

Students reflected on their advocacy project by writing about what they did and what they perceived as the outcomes. They also shared their views on the practicality of social media-based advocacy as an approach to addressing social issues.

Our analysis of students' reflection papers yielded three themes: (1) Social media-based advocacy is surprisingly challenging; (2) advocacy processes are perhaps as important as advocacy outcomes; and (3) social media infrastructure both hinders and aids advocacy effectiveness. We present each of these themes below, with a sampling of statements from students' reflection papers.

Theme 1: Social media-based advocacy is surprisingly challenging. The majority of students incorporated a formal or informal definition of *public advocacy* in their papers. They understood that advocacy is the active support of a cause, idea, proposal, or policy. Despite expressing a fairly good understanding of what it entails, students said they were surprised that advocacy was such a challenge. A considerable number of them said they thought advocacy would be easy, especially because of the accessibility of social media sites. However, students found it "pretty challenging," "much harder than it looks," and "definitely harder than I imagined."

One of the students reported that she tried to use the advocacy process to gain support for establishing a sports camp as a safe space for at-risk children in the local community. However, she soon realized it was a goal that was too challenging to accomplish:

When I first began the project I thought that a camp would work but there are many difficulties with that. I decided to change my primary goal to raising awareness about the needs of at risk children and the benefits of becoming a mentor to the children.

In a similar vein, one of her classmates wrote:

We wanted to create a pen-pal program . . . that would help students on campus engage in being a mentor for a child via mail. I later realized that this would be too hard to do, so I stepped back from trying to create such

[an] extensive process and focused on trying to deliver a message through . . . social media.

In their reflection papers, students mentioned that they experienced difficulties in stimulating dialogue and other forms of participation on their Facebook pages. Some said it was difficult to get people to leave comments or even simply to like the Facebook page. As one said, “I faced challenges with finding friends and getting people to interact and spread the word about my purpose.”

Some students attributed the lack of participation by social media users largely to “the sensitive nature” of some issues. For example, students whose advocacy project addressed the issue of domestic violence or HIV/AIDS reported their failure to attract enough attention or response from the public. As one student pointed out, “This [HIV/AIDS] can be a very touchy matter for most people and I’m almost positive they won’t feel any better opening up to me about such a sensitive topic.”

The limitation of time posed a considerable challenge as well. Students shared that the advocacy assignment was more demanding than they expected and they did not have enough time to devote to it. They seemed to understand that the advocacy project should not necessarily end when they completed the course. And although they found their cause worthy, several students mentioned time constraints in connection with this.

Whereas students expressed surprise at how challenging social media-based advocacy turned out to be, some of them acknowledged that challenge was both inevitable and worthwhile. Those students expressed a desire to continue with their advocacy project after the semester ended.

Theme 2: Advocacy processes are perhaps as important as advocacy outcomes. Students reported that they eventually learned the importance of paying attention to the process of advocacy instead of keeping most of their attention on numerical outcomes such as the number of likes on Facebook or followers on Twitter. They referred to the process as involving effective argumentation and tailoring messages to the intended audience, as indicated in the following representative comments:

In order to get through to people and make them actually listen to our ideas and thoughts, we must listen to the people ourselves. . . . We realized it was important to keep our audience intrigued and wanting to keep looking out for our [Facebook] page. . . . Being that

[domestic violence] is such a touchy subject, we didn't want to say the wrong things to turn off our audience. We tried our best to respond as carefully as we could.

We needed to get people in a thought process that makes them want to act. Maybe liking a page might help. We have tried posting pictures, videos, and even tried to interact with people with questions. We even tried to keep the posts small in order for people to read all our posts with ease.

It takes time to build relationships with our audience and to keep our fan base. . . . Our group had to find a way to keep people's attention and to gain their trust.

Admitting that she paid scant attention to process, one student wrote, "I could have done more to attract people to my page. My page content could have been more relatable to a wider audience."

For some students, the most noteworthy aspect was the opportunity to explore a social issue while simultaneously connecting with social media users. Those students "felt like an advocate," experienced "a feeling of satisfaction," and welcomed the "opportunity for finding our own voice." Here is an illustrative excerpt from a reflection paper:

I learned something different every time I searched for information to post. I felt like this project gave me a chance to be a teacher, student, advocate and supporter. I felt like a teacher because I posted to refresh the memories and [increase] the general knowledge about this topic, but at the same time I [became] educated with deeper information that wasn't taught in a high school health class. I felt like a student because I learned just as my peers did from the information I found and posted. I felt like an advocate because I made a social networking page to support a prominent cause in our society. And last I felt like a supporter because I do support the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Students came to understand the importance of carefully managing their advocacy-related social media presence and the content of the pages they created. Many wished they had done more, not only to attract users to the sites but also to hold users' attention and to

prompt meaningful interactions such as posting questions, sharing facts and figures, and adding comments.

Theme 3: Social media infrastructure both hinders and aids advocacy effectiveness. In their reflection papers, students commented on social media infrastructure and how it functioned in relation to their advocacy efforts. They drew attention to specific elements of the social media platforms that, in their view, either hindered or aided effective advocacy. One student wrote:

Facebook is an open format [site that allows users] to raise questions and concerns about a particular cause and gives the public a chance to contribute by commenting on statuses and pictures. . . . After you have reached a threshold of over thirty likes, you are able to receive insights on your page that breaks down the demographics that view your page such as gender, age, and geographic locations.

The public participation generated on Facebook was mainly the use of the “Like” feature. Although it offered ease of use, some students found that feature to be far less effective than they desired:

I didn’t get enough likes on the page. . . . I’ve also discovered that I won’t know for sure if I’m reaching out [effectively] to others or if anyone acts on the tips posted on the page. . . . I can never be one hundred percent sure that the rates [of HIV/AIDS] are decreasing because of my page or that parents came across my page and decided that they must go home and talk to their children about sex.

We wish there were more comments on our page and more people would actually share information. That would be more meaningful than people just liking our page.

Twitter has always seemed like the way to go. I have seen some advocacy pages on Twitter and they succeed . . . [because they] have hashtags. People who used Twitter have more followers than we [Facebook users] have likes. . . . In the end, our advocacy project was a bust. I think the limitations of Facebook made it a bust.

Meanwhile, one of the students who used Facebook to advocate on behalf of domestic violence victims argued, “If we were to

use a medium like Twitter, we would be limited to [140] characters a tweet and couldn't get our message out that well." Here is part of that message (composed of 296 characters) shared on Facebook:

Children who grow up witnessing domestic violence are among those seriously affected by it. Frequent exposure to violence in the home not only predisposes children to numerous social and physical problems, but also teaches them that violence is a normal way of life, increasing their risk of becoming society's next generation of victims and abusers.

Some students felt that the public nature of social media inhibited responses to their advocacy efforts by individuals who could have provided valuable feedback and insights. They concluded that people who were affected by certain sensitive issues wanted to maintain anonymity or privacy regarding those issues and to protect themselves. In relation to domestic violence, for instance, one student wrote,

Safety is one of the important things for victims. They do not spend time chatting on the different social media networks because they need to protect themselves from their abuser.

Other students stressed the benefits of social media in spreading positive messages and seeking support for certain causes. Two students noted,

Facebook has open access and allows us to reach people all over the world. We can see how many people clicked on some of what we posted.

We didn't get enough likes on the page, but who is to say that we did not reach hundreds of individuals with our positive messages?

The student who turned to Tumblr as an advocacy medium felt that the site offered enough freshness and remained popular among young adults. Although she was a newcomer to Tumblr, the student was aware of the seven post types available: text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, and video. That student employed most of the post types to draw attention to the dangers of procedures

performed by unqualified and unlicensed surgeons. Although she did not achieve her goal of attracting 100 followers, the student expressed satisfaction with the responses because they indicated public interest in the topic.

The student who used Blogger (*blogspot.com*) considered the site “amazing” because it allowed multiuser blogs with time-stamped entries. It also permitted the user to choose from various templates and then customize them. One of its limitations, as the student found out, was that only 100 blogs are allowed for each account.

In sum, themes pertaining to the challenges of advocacy, the relative importance of advocacy processes, and the function of social media infrastructure emerged from the qualitative data. In what follows, we discuss these findings, the study’s limitations, and the implications of the findings for teaching and research.

Discussion

Social Media Use

Students used Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Blogger for their advocacy project. Domestic violence was the social issue presented by most students; however, the two Facebook pages on this topic—“Support Against DV” and “PeaceLoveUnity”—collectively had fewer posts than individual Facebook pages on other topics. Neither of the two pages had links to other, relevant sites. The picture of an obviously bruised and battered woman on one of the Facebook pages, together with the emotionally charged “Abuse Hurts,” could have been more effective if the students had added hyperlinks.

The relatively large number of likes generated by the body image/self-esteem page titled “The Naked Truth: Stay Classy, Not Trashy” suggests that many potential supporters of this advocacy effort had at least received the message. Regarding two other social media pages, there was greater engagement by the youth development advocacy team (urging “Be the Change”) than by the students whose focus issue was HIV/AIDS. It should be noted that the youth development team made twice as many tweets as the students addressing HIV/AIDS.

In general, an increased number of links from Facebook to other sites with complementary content could have been helpful in advancing our students’ advocacy efforts. Similarly, more hashtags with tweets could have been effective. Prior research found that hashtags support the aggregating of knowledge, the speedy dissem-

inating of information, and the mobilizing of supporters during advocacy campaigns (*Guo & Saxton, 2014*).

Authentic advocacy entails more than raising awareness or increasing the visibility of an issue; it also involves mobilizing supporters and championing responses within the political, economic, or social system (*Bowen, 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2014*). It seems that the majority of students stopped short of authentic advocacy by using social media primarily as an avenue of expression and by concentrating on building awareness about issues. There was little indication of any genuine attempt to create a community online (*see Gordon, 2014*)—despite what is understood to be the generally tenuous ties among social media users—and to press for support from decision makers in the political or social sphere.

Reflection Papers

We inferred from our reading of the reflection papers that students mostly chose social issues of personal concern to them (e.g., obesity and body image) rather than choosing based on the prevalence of those issues in today's society. Although their reflection papers conveyed a fairly good understanding of the concept of (public) advocacy, most students seemed to have only a rudimentary grasp of advocacy procedures generally and social media-based advocacy specifically. By and large, students directed their efforts at raising awareness about issues, and it appears that they expected responses mainly from people directly affected by those issues (e.g., victims of domestic violence).

Understandably, the single-semester time frame did not allow enough time for students to ascertain whether their advocacy efforts were truly successful. Even those students who may have mobilized some supporters would most likely not know whether that had achieved any system-level influence on policy- or practice-related decision making.

For many students, the key indicator of success in using social media for advocacy was the number of likes on their Facebook pages, with a large number of likes suggesting a greater degree of success. That is understandable because the number of likes is one of the most accessible pieces of data, providing at least a quantitative indicator of positive feedback on Facebook posts. Still, students were not expected to see "likes" as the totality, or even strong evidence, of engagement on the part of any social media user. Liking a page or a post is, after all, similar to joining an online movement without becoming really involved (*see LaRiviere et al., 2012*).

Some students did insist, as they should, that the number of likes did not say much in terms of advocacy effectiveness. Take, for example, the student who created the “STDs: Protect Yourself, Get Tested” Facebook page. The student posted 29 messages (eight of them with video clips), garnering 34 likes. As the student stressed in her reflection paper, she did not know whether anyone acted on any of the promptings contained in those messages.

The first emergent theme captured the surprising challenges of social media-based advocacy. Some of the challenges faced by students were perhaps rooted in the nature and extent of the goals they had set for themselves and their project. A few goals were simply unrealistic, if only because of the short time frame (one semester). Such was the goal of establishing a sports camp as a safe space for at-risk children in the local community. This theme also conveyed that active learning enables students to differentiate between imagined and informed realities. Because Facebook and Twitter are popular, many students had imagined that using either platform for advocacy purposes would be easy.

Only a few students—those who felt passionate about the cause they embraced—expressed a desire to continue with their advocacy project after they completed their course assignment. Those students did not view engagement as residing within the confines of the communication course. They had apparently developed a mind-set and the willingness to continue pursuing their advocacy goals as a longer term endeavor.

Calling attention to the importance of advocacy processes vis-à-vis advocacy outcomes, the second theme shows the benefit of hindsight in the context of reflection. Students made it clear that they came to understand the importance of maintaining and managing their advocacy-related social media pages only as they reflected on their experiences. As they reflected, they were able to make informed valuations of the actual investments—in time, collaboration, and material resources—necessary for advocacy goals to be achieved.

Although there was perhaps too much emphasis on mere awareness raising, some students did use social media for research that could build knowledge about specific social issues, including their root causes. Understanding the root causes of issues prepares students to take the next step in reaching out to people who can do something about those issues.

Regarding the third theme, students shared varying views on whether and how social media infrastructure hindered or aided

their advocacy efforts. The students who felt connected strongly to the identified social issue were more inclined to navigate the social media system in order to engage with others regarding the issue. The students who felt that the public nature of social media inhibited responses to their advocacy efforts may have forgotten that they should have been pursuing *public* advocacy. Seemingly targeting only people who may have been personally affected by the social issue was misguided. The students' cause would have been better served if they had presented compelling information to the public instead of directing selective messages to people based on their perceived ability to provide feedback.

Prior research had revealed that the functionality of social media platforms could support advocacy (e.g., Junco *et al.*, 2011; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Moreover, the popularity of standard-bearers Facebook and Twitter, with their open access and wide reach, implies that they can be instrumental in advocacy campaigns. Twitter users should keep in mind that they can circumvent the 140-character restriction by adding hyperlinks. Thereby they can share longer textual information as well as photos and videos.

Limitations of the Study

The research reported in this article had limitations related to social media technology, particularly in connection with Facebook. Privacy settings on Facebook, although beneficial in many respects, had a negative impact on dialogue. Public access to comments, and hence to a continual flow of dialogue, was dependent on the way users (account holders) set the privacy options of their Facebook account. Advocacy project participants with administrative privileges were able to see all posted comments, but visitors to the site were limited to viewing those comments that were made public. Consequently, site visitors did not have the opportunity to respond to previous comments and were unable to contribute to a coherent public discourse in the online environment.

In addition, many students set up pages for their advocacy project as offshoots of their personal pages. As a result, their personal privacy settings limited public access to their advocacy project pages. Although the course instructors had emphasized the importance of creating public pages for public advocacy, students often failed to comply. For a similar project in the future, there should be insistence on independent social media pages with full public access.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study hold implications for teaching and learning as well as for research. With respect to teaching and learning, a course-based project such as this is best treated not as an overly academic enterprise but as a project that has real-life utility. In this regard, advocacy approached as service-learning may be quite effective (see *Berke et al., 2010; Bowen, 2014*). Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with coursework and critical reflection to enrich the learning experience, foster civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Undergirded by civic engagement, this pedagogical strategy reflects a paradigm shift marked by active learning. Adopting an advocacy approach to address social issues is regarded as the “social change” alternative to providing direct service.

Students could benefit from being required to reflect on their advocacy project throughout the semester. Such reflection could help them avoid technological pitfalls and could lead to better utilization of processes that enable consequential results from their advocacy efforts. Regular reflection also would offer opportunities for students to enhance their reflective writing skills so their final papers would contain more-nuanced expressions of their advocacy experiences.

Further, faculty developing a similar advocacy project could consider encouraging students to develop a content plan that includes topical information to be posted and a list of desired outcomes that are realistic. Before embarking on the project, students also should be encouraged to outline a strategy with practical tactics to attract public responses and to sustain interest in the cause or issue being addressed. The strategy could emphasize persuasive social media discourse as well as effective engagement as demonstrated through questions posted, responses provided, and offline actions reported.

It is important for course instructors to cover the fundamentals of advocacy and to stress that awareness raising is not the totality of advocacy but only a necessary first step. Apart from providing information that builds awareness, advocates deliberately speak out on issues of concern in order to exert some influence on behalf of causes or people. Students assigned an advocacy project can take advantage of the affordances of social media to amplify voices, organize individuals, and mobilize support for people affected by identified issues.

With regard to research, students' use of social media within the context of a course warrants further investigation. We would like to determine the extent to which students can use social media effectively not only to draw attention to social issues but also to mobilize support in the online community, and, furthermore, to exert influence offline on the powers that be. If we were to undertake further research in this area, we would perhaps design it to include analysis involving the categorization of issue-focused, online communication content (both text and images) as well as techniques used to advance online advocacy. To increase participation in the research, we would offer incentives for online dialogue and for offline interaction and social action tied to the overall advocacy efforts.

Finally, we recommend empirical investigation by others that might involve a comparison of the outcomes of online advocacy with those of more-traditional forms of advocacy. Future research could also be designed to demonstrate how social media-supported advocacy can best serve as a catalyst for offline civic engagement.

Conclusion

Does students' use of social media for advocacy facilitate engagement with a social issue? The answer is yes. Granted that our students did not provide compelling evidence of exemplary advocacy, our research still revealed that they demonstrated some degree of engagement through their social media activity. For the most part, students used social media as an avenue of expression and as a conveyance of information. They posted messages on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Blogger about salient social issues and received responses from other social media users.

In conclusion, technology-mediated advocacy can provide motivation for collective action, but only if social media pages are organized intentionally and maintained consistently. Less-episodic student activity on social media will be necessary to effect more-authentic, higher-threshold engagement; to bring technology-mediated advocacy goals within reach; and to demonstrate the action-eliciting potential of such activity. It is incumbent on educators to create the conditions that will help students become engaged learners and develop facility in using social media for social good.

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Methodological Addendum

Critical social research methodology guided this study as it is appropriate to a critical-dialectical analysis of the social world. The qualitative approach was designed to produce expressions from participants reflecting how they viewed the social world. Applying the tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA) facilitated understanding of social reality by presenting an integrated view of text and images within their specific contexts. However, CDA did not provide a holistic analysis of participants' issue-focused advocacy and engagement efforts.

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